

A RELIGION OF LIFE?

Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater: Victorian Aestheticism, Doubt, and Secularisation. By SARA LYONS. Oxford: Legenda, 2015; £55.

‘Come On, Humans, One More Effort If You Want To Be Post-Christians!’ is the cheeky title of a 2006 essay on theology’s political futures by the art theorist Thierry de Duve. Taking inspiration from the Marquis de Sade’s politically expedient essay of 1795, ‘Français, encore un effort si vous voulez être républicains’, Duve argues we can resolve the contradictions of post-Enlightenment political thinking only through a return to Christianity. The allusion to Sade introduces further contradictions. Although we must return to Christianity, we were never post-Christians. For Duve, following Marcel Gauchet, Christianity is ‘the religion of the exit from religion’:

It is this above all that is meant by the dispatch of the Messiah, and his death. He came, nothing has changed, so it’s up to you from here on out. The God who abandons his Son to his ignominious death is under no illusions. In other words, he has no belief. He had to take things this far for the death of his Son to be the sign of his act of faith.

Where do we go from here? For the ‘new materialism’ currently emerging from literature and philosophy departments, one such response might be to cultivate an openness to that which is most rousing, enchanting, or disturbing in the world around us – a response we might recognise from British aestheticism. ‘It is no longer before the knees of either an imaginary being or a vile impostor a republican must prostrate himself’, Sade writes; ‘his only gods must now be *courage* and *liberty*’. For aestheticism, we might say: ‘his only gods must now be *beauty* and *life*’.

Lyons’s *Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater* arrives as part of a wider effort among critics to revalue Victorian literature in the light of recent challenges from history and sociology to the

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‘secularisation thesis’: that ‘the conditions of modernity inevitably, or at least irreversibly, relegate religion to the margins of social life and lead to a general disengagement from traditional theologies and supernatural explanations of the world’. The book argues that Pater’s and Swinburne’s theologies are defined by contradiction: they ‘move fluidly between a “disinterested” secularism that affirms the poetic value of all religious feelings while affirming the truth of none, and a “pagan” secularism that bids us to return to the world, to sexuality, to life in the here and the now’. For Lyons the phrase *l’art pour l’art*, which Pater and Swinburne inherited from Baudelaire and Gautier, embodies this contradictory metaphysics. The phrase exalts sensual pleasure and the irrational aspects of aesthetic experience; but it also suggests ‘the notion that aesthetic experience requires or enables a special kind of detachment’, comparable in certain situations to Matthew Arnold’s ideal of imaginative reason.

Lyons calls this detachment Pater’s ‘transcendental disinterestedness’, which takes the place of lost religious faith. But Lyons is less certain of what this transcendental ideal might mean for Swinburne. Lyons suggests that, in Swinburne’s ideal, ‘art represented a realm beyond all religious dogma and partisanship’; and yet Swinburne relied on harnessing ‘the passionate extremes of religious emotion’ to construct a new secular theology of earthly life. The language Lyons uses here of separate worlds or realms, one of which contains a higher truth beyond our everyday experience, naturally brings to mind the dualism of Plato. Yet this could not be further from the metaphysics of Swinburne’s verse.

For Lyons, aestheticism is an attempt to construct a ‘religion of life’. For aestheticism, the material world of our immediate sensual perception is worthy of religious reverence. A transcendental explanation of beauty is not only unnecessary, but forlorn and deceptive, leading us astray from life, pleasure, and action. Swinburne and Pater draw inspiration from an imagined ‘pagan’ sensibility, a state defined by its opposition to Christianity and identified with the religions of ancient Greece and Rome, to construct a new religion of life. However, Lyons suggests, this religion of immanence fails because the modern

'pagan' can never move beyond Christianity: Christianity is the thesis needed for an antithetical 'pagan' subjectivity to be possible at all.

One can imagine Swinburne, whom Lyons calls 'perhaps the most belligerent anti-theist' in English verse, raging at this conclusion. 'I foresee I shall soon have to defend myself from the charge of being a moralist – a deist – even (chi lo sa?) a Galilean', writes Swinburne to William Michael Rossetti, reflecting on the reception of *Poems and Ballads* and its artistic indebtedness to Christianity. 'It is really very odd that people (friendly or unfriendly) will not let one be an artist, but must needs make one out a parson or a pimp. I suppose it is part of the fetid and fecund spawn of the "Galilean serpent".' People, in other words, cannot but define the artist in terms of his relationship with faith: he is either pious, or a doubter, or a blasphemer. Swinburne argues that his art cannot escape being read through its relationship to Christianity. Implicitly, so long as we wait for the arrival of a truly non-transcendental mode of being, art for art's sake remains an impossible ideal. Swinburne's condemnation of Christianity rests not only on the view, expressed in 'Hymn to Proserpine' and 'Laus Veneris', that revering Christ means turning away from life and surrendering personal and artistic freedom. It also rests on what Swinburne understands as the falsehood of Christian compassion, ignoring and even fighting against the struggles of the world's wretched for republican liberty. Lyons's sensitive reading of 'Before a Crucifix' from *Songs Before Sunrise* (1871) accentuates Swinburne's striving to reject 'the Christian spiritualisation of sorrow'. Instead, Lyons argues, Swinburne reaches for a 'strenuous joy' that embraces life and the pleasures of the body alongside vaguely defined struggles for political freedom. Hellenic spirituality lifts Swinburne into his most joyful moods, as in 'A Nympholept' or the 'When the hounds of spring are on winter's traces' chorus from *Atalanta in Calydon* (1865).

The nature of this 'pagan' subjectivity is the key problem of Lyons's book, a problem which remains unresolved. Lyons's understanding of the 'pagan' depends on a series of vague characterisations by Pater and Swinburne. These statements come from a number of different times in both writers' lives, and

often contradict one another. Swinburne's 1862 review of Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857) outlines modern paganism as a particular 'tone of thought' which 'endeavours to look at most things with the eye of an old world poet', and 'aims at regaining the clear and simple view of writers content to believe in the beauty of material subjects'. Pater's 1867 essay on Winckelmann defines the 'pagan sentiment' as a more melancholy one:

This pagan sentiment is what measures the sadness with which the human mind is filled whenever its thoughts wander far from what is here, and now. It is beset by notions of irresistible natural powers, for the most part ranged against man, but the secret also of his luck, making the earth golden and the grape fiery for him ... It is with a rush of homesickness that the thought of death presents itself. He would remain at home for ever on the earth if he could.

The key metaphysical claim of Pater's early work, as identified by Stopford Brooke in the 1860s, was not only to deny the existence of the afterlife, but also to suggest that 'the absence of such a belief might be elevating, even the precondition for a special kind of "self-culture"'. Pater insists that a Heraclitean world of flux does not have to leave us in despair – because, as Pater writes in an early version of the 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance*, our sense of beauty depends on its transience, 'the desire of beauty quickened by the sense of death'. Lyons argues convincingly that, during the earlier stages of Pater's career, he closely aligned himself with Swinburne's anti-Christianity. In my view, the power of Pater's opposition of paganism and Christianity lies in its subtlety, as in his 'Study of Dionysus':

That supposed loss is but an imperfect measure of all that the name of Dionysus recalled to the Greek mind, under a single imaginable form, an outward body of flesh presented to the senses, and comprehending, as its animating soul, a whole world of thoughts, surmises, greater and less experiences.

For Lyons, Pater began to diverge from Swinburne in his approach to achieving secularism: 'where Swinburne attacks the ambiguities of the discourses of religious doubt, Pater perceives the extent to which it is possible to critique this inheritance and advance beyond it by working within its terms'. In texts such as the essay 'Diaphaneité' (1864) and *The Renaissance*, Pater manipulates what Lyons calls the Arnoldian 'cult of nuance' to heretical ends. As Lyons explains in her third chapter, Arnold believes his ideal of 'imaginative reason' will arise from the *agon* of paganism and Christianity, which fuses the ethical power of Christianity with pagan sensuousness and rationalism. The early Pater uses this *agon* not to fuse paganism with Christianity but to split Christianity apart through pagan insight. In one of Lyons's most striking readings, Pater's 'Conclusion' demonstrates what the philosopher Martin Hägglund calls 'radical atheism' or 'chronolibido':

That the desire for immortality is incoherent, and masks an underlying attachment to mortal life – we do not really desire to transcend time, because desire itself is saturated with the temporal; what we really desire is to live on in time. In other words, like Swinburne's Iseult, we do not want immortality but more mortal life.

Lyons's difficulties with the nature and function of the 'pagan' reflect a broader struggle with the term in the contemporary humanities. Although John Marenbon's *Pagans and Philosophers: The Problem of Paganism from Augustine to Leibniz* (2015) offers an invaluable historical overview of Christian encounters with the wisdom and virtue of classical authors, we still have no theology or philosophy of a truly 'modern' paganism. This leads to a sense of intellectual incompleteness in otherwise praiseworthy works, such as *The Enchantment of Modern Life* (2001), an argument for the aesthetic and ethical importance of this-worldliness by the neo-Spinozist philosopher Jane Bennett. Although the term 'pagan' is central to the book, Bennett resists defining the term and wields it to evoke delight, awe, and nostalgia in an essentially secular theology. For Bennett, the 'pagan' sensibility is a joyous

embrace of immanence and rejection of transcendence, a sensibility she aligns with the thought of Epicurus, Spinoza, and Deleuze. But such a usage neglects an important aspect of the word 'pagan': it indicates not merely a particular metaphysical way of thinking, but a specifically religious one.

Lyons's interpretation of the 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance* makes Pater's rapprochement with Christianity later in his life seem a capitulation. As Lyons puts it, 'there is no getting back to the garden, no simple recuperation of lost belief; a late convert to orthodoxy is also an apostate from apostasy, and is likely to appear "ironical", "insincere", even "sordid"'. But Lyons argues that *Marius the Epicurean* (1885) does not mark a fundamental change in Pater's metaphysics. Rather, she reads the novel's ambivalent treatment of Marius's final conversion and martyrdom as an example of the movement of doubt and agnosticism to the cultural mainstream of the 1870s and 1880s. As a result, Pater 'apparently felt less impetus to construct aestheticism as an oppositional discourse and more free to posit it as an extension of a prevailing cultural mood'. Texts which critics frequently interpret as evidence of Pater moving towards embracing Christianity late in life, such as his 1901 review of Mrs Humphry Ward's novel *Robert Elsmere*, are more problematic for Lyons. In the review Pater writes of a 'large class of minds' who 'make allowance in their scheme of life for a great possibility' of faith. Lyons does not resolve the significance of these statements, underestimating the degree to which Pater's thought – above all, his understanding of *aisthēsis* – evolved over time. Ultimately her account of Pater's later work does not ring true to *Marius*, a novel whose heart is the grief, resignation, and ultimate acceptance of martyrdom.

With admirable caution, Lyons confines her argument to the late nineteenth century, noting that 'aestheticism would often seem facile and embarrassing to a later generation of modernist writers', particularly given 'its tendency to stake its claims on the beauties of the material world and upon the abundance of the gratifications available in the here and now'. But a bolder case could be made for Pater and Swinburne's quasi-secular aestheticism as a foundational moment for the theologies of much of twentieth century verse. The dream of re-creating the

imagined pagan sentiment, or finding full spiritual satisfaction in the immanent and material, persists through Pound and Yeats, and even to a certain extent Zukofsky and Olson, perhaps as one of the motivating forces behind those poets' preoccupation with formal innovation. Peter Liebrechts's *Ezra Pound and Neoplatonism* (2004) provides a luminous account of such a theological materialism that is, at its heart, a profoundly Paterian response to Platonic transcendentalism, and would make an excellent companion to *Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater*.

Against Swinburne's wishes, the Church of England burial service was read over his grave. Helen Rossetti recounts how 'to my horror I saw the coffin was covered with a purple pall on which was designed a huge white cross, and I thought of his verses: "Thou hast conquered, oh pale Galilean, and the world has grown grey from thy breath"'. A sense of sadness hangs over the conclusion of Lyons's argument: that we seem to live in a state slowly but inexorably passing beyond Christianity, but also that we have not yet found an alternative system of thought capable of filling the metaphysical void that cries out for religious feeling. As British aestheticism continues to enjoy a revival of interest, it becomes ever more urgent to reassess the metaphysical work that Pater and Swinburne have done for us in their search for a way beyond doubt. *Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater* is a timely reminder of our intellectual inheritance from this moment of crisis in Western religion.

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Auden at Work. Edited by BONNIE COSTELLO and RACHEL GALVIN. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; \$100.

A browser among library shelves, glimpsing the title *Auden at Work* pressed between the spines of other volumes, might well pull it down with the hope of discovering anecdotes about